

## Revelation and Prophethood in the Islamic Worldview

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### ***Abstract***

Belief in God's message and messengers is a basic article of Islamic faith. Though it is sent to all humankind, revelation is not communicable directly from God to everyone at all times. The channel through which revelation became known to humankind is prophethood. Both revelation and prophethood are thus intertwined; the explanation of one will remain wanting without reference to the other. Following a textual analysis of the major Islamic references, this study explores the meaningfulness of revelation and prophethood, their function and place in the Islamic worldview, and their relevance to the contemporary era. It examines whether the prophetic message has been supplanted or subserved by humans' intellectual enlightenment and their technological advancement.

### ***Introduction***

Islam was inaugurated by the first revelation to Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ). In Islam, Almighty Allah, Who creates, also cares. He has created everything, bestowed upon everything He created its due proportion and appropriate faculties, and has then guided it to achieve its appropriate purposes (Q: 20:50; 87:2-3). Divine guidance to humans comes in two forms: intellectual faculty bestowed upon every human by which to think, reflect and distinguish right from wrong; and divine revelation sent to humans by virtue of their intellectual faculty through selected individuals among their own species to guide them to the right courses of action.

The centrality of prophethood is evident from the fact that it forms the content of the second clause of the *Shahādah* (Testimony of Faith). It is also one of the articles of Islamic faith. The source of legitimacy for being a prophet is Allah (S.W.T) via His revelation. The prophets (peace be upon them) functioned as a 'channel' to receive and transmit the divine revelation to humankind. Though revelation and prophethood are not the same, they overlap and are very much interrelated.

In addressing this topic, several questions come to mind. What is it in revelation which is or is not within human reach? How relevant is the prophetic message to human socio-historical conditions? Why there were many messengers, one succeeding the other? Would not the world

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be a better place to live, and would not human socio-historical problems be better solved if revelation continued and prophethood remained open-ended? These questions will be addressed in the light of the Islamic worldview (*ru'yat al-Islām lil-wujūd*<sup>1</sup>), understood as “a metaphysical survey of the visible as well as the invisible worlds, including the perspective of life as a whole”<sup>2</sup> or as “a unified and comprehensive view of the world around us and man’s place within it.”<sup>3</sup> Following a textual analysis of the major Islamic references, this study examines the meaningfulness of revelation and prophethood, their function and place in the Islamic worldview, and their relevance to the contemporary era. It aims to investigate whether the prophetic message has been supplanted or subserved by humans’ intellectual enlightenment and their technological advancement.

### ***The Nature of Revelation and Prophethood***

*Wahy* (commonly translated into English as ‘revelation’) is a verbal noun, which conveys two basic meanings: *khafā’* (secrecy) and *sur’ah* (quickness). The Qur’ān uses it in this literal sense to convey a variety of meanings, each of which indicates the main underlying idea of inspiration or directing someone/something. It has been used to mean natural human inspiration (Q: 28:7), instinct or inspiration for animals (Q:16:68), a quick signal as a suggestion (Q: 19:11), whispering of the Devil (Q: 6:112, 121), and communication with angels (Q: 8:12) and with prophets (Q: 4:163-164). Technically, *wahy* refers exclusively to the revelation from God to His prophets concerning the fundamentals of belief and action. An alternative explanation would be the act by which God, having created the world, discloses Himself to His creation. It is a phenomenon whereby a supra-human, or supernatural, communication is transmitted from the divine to the human. Alternatively, it may be thought of as an epiphany of the divine order which presents itself to

<sup>1</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, reprint. 2001, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, “The Worldview of Islam: An Outline,” in Sharifah Shifa Al-Attas (ed.), *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Historical and Contemporary Contexts* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1996), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin G. Rand, “Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meineck,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 25 (1964), p. 551.

human sight, hearing, sensibility and consciousness as an event out of the ordinary course.<sup>4</sup>

God's revelation has been channeled through one of three forms: inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by sending an angel (Q: 42:51); it was never in the form of personal contact or incarnation. In the Islamic worldview, there has never been a time in history when God descended or made a radical transformation in His divine nature. When it relates to humankind, it is always a verbal communication, clothed in language, but that language is not quite the same as that of ordinary human speech; it has sublimity to it that is not usually within the compass of ordinary speech.<sup>5</sup>

Prophethood, on the other hand, is the English translation of the Arabic word *nubuwwah*. The Qur'ān uses the terms *nabī* and *rasūl* several times, commonly translated into English as 'prophet' and 'messenger' respectively. *Nabī* refers to a prophet who gives news from God. *Rasūl* generally refers to a human sent by God to mankind—although sometimes it is also applied to the angel of revelation, one who is sent by God to the prophets.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, Muslim exegetes of the Qur'ān have distinguished between both terms, saying that *nabī* means a divine envoy without a *sharī'ah*, and presumably without a revealed book, while *rasūl* means one with a *sharī'ah* and a revealed book. Modern Muslim scholars of the Qur'ān agree that *rasūl* signifies something weightier than *nabī*, for a *nabī* can be an auxiliary to a *rasūl*, as Prophet Hārūn was to Prophet Mūsā (Q: 19:51, 53); however, more than one *rasūl* can be jointly commissioned (Q: 36:13, 16).<sup>7</sup>

The prophetic experience has been described by Muslim theologians as something beyond ordinary experience. During his experience, a prophet's faculties are raised to acute heights; he is under the domination of a divine power which he cannot resist, and his innermost belief, all the

<sup>4</sup> Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1997), p. 26-27; Thameem Ushama, "The Phenomenon of *Wahy*," *Muslim Education Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2005), pp. 68-68.

<sup>5</sup> Yaqub Zaki, "The Concept of Revelation in Islam," *The Islamic Quarterly*, vol. 27 (1983), p. 72; Sir Nizam Jung, "Thoughts on Revelation," *Islamic Culture*, vol. 11 (1937), p. 60; Ausaf Ali, "The Concept of Revelation and its Implications for Theological Ethics in Judaism, Christianity and Islam," *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1997), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

while, is that the message of guidance and salvation has come directly from God as a ‘revelation’ and must be conveyed at once to his fellow beings.<sup>8</sup> According to Ibn Khaldūn (732–808/1332–1406), prophetic experience is essentially a kind of trance, a sudden leap from the human level of consciousness to that of the divine order. In this trance the ordinary human cognitive powers are drastically transformed so that the subject undergoing the experience becomes overwhelmed. This transformation is a momentary exchange between human consciousness and pure angelic consciousness, uninhibited by the mediation of the human body. As a result of this exchange or transformation, the subject becomes totally immersed in the spiritual medium of the angelic realm and becomes capable of perceiving and understanding the divine message. At the termination of the prophetic experience, the subject returns to the ordinary human condition. However, he does not lose or forget the experience and the perception he attained whilst in that higher realm. He retains them in an exceptionally vivid manner as if engraved on his heart. The prophet is then charged with communicating the content of his experience to the people rationally. This communication of divine guidance to the people is the very essence of the prophetic role.<sup>9</sup>

Once it becomes clear that a person is a true prophet of God, it follows that his message should be accepted. It is imprudent and illogical to accept a man as God’s true prophet and yet not to believe in what he says and not follow what he orders. Undoubtedly, obedience to him in religious matters is obedience to God; conversely, disobedience to him is tantamount to disobedience to God, as stated in the Qur’ān (4:64-65; 4:80).

The prophets were extraordinary men who shook people’s consciences from a state of tradition-bound hypomoral placidity into one of alertness in which they could clearly see God as God and Satan as Satan.<sup>10</sup> They are distinguished by their superb moral characters. Even before receiving revelation, the prophets-to-be were recognizable as good and innocent persons, naturally averse to any reprehensible or sinful action. They were disposed to avoid and shun blameworthy actions, as if such actions were the negation of their very nature. Such

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<sup>8</sup> Jung, “Thoughts on Revelation,” p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> See Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 184-185.

<sup>10</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, p. 80.

dispositions were necessary for their souls to be capable of receiving revelation and of bearing the grand responsibility they were to undertake. According to Muslim theologians of the Sunni school of thought, there are six essential characteristics of Prophethood: truthfulness, trustworthiness, communication of God's commands, intelligence, infallibility, and lack of any mental or physical defect.<sup>11</sup>

As a special gift for chosen individuals, prophecy is ultimately a divine favour which cannot be acquired by sheer effort. The Qur'ān states: "*Allah chooses messengers from angels and from men, for Allah is He Who hears and sees (all things)*"<sup>12</sup> (22:75; see also 6:124; 42:52). Prophet Muḥammad's opponents disparaged his prophethood partly because he was underqualified in their view. They exclaimed disapprovingly "*Why was this Qur'an not sent down to some leading man in either of the two (chief) cities [of Makkah and Ṭā'if]?*" (43:31) "*What! Has the Message been sent to him (of all persons) among us?*" (38:8). Muḥammad (ﷺ) had no conscious desire to become a prophet, nor did he make efforts to that end; rather his experience of revelation was sudden, as stated in the Qur'ān: "*And you (Muḥammad) had not expected that the Book would be inspired to you, but it is a mercy from your Lord*" (28:86). To de-naturalize prophecy, Imām al-Ghazālī (450-505 AH/1058-1111) explains that prophecy is not a matter of pure chance to be given to everyone, nor is it attained by pure effort such that anyone who cares to apply himself may have it. But it is a divine favour bestowed on those whom God had prepared through their actions for the reception of revelation.<sup>13</sup>

It must be added that in the Islamic worldview the status of prophethood is the highest position any human being can reach. No man rises above the status and rank of a prophet or messenger of God, who himself remains a creature and servant of God. The Qur'ān reiterates that the messengers of God cannot be more than humans.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 1, pp. 185-186; M. Fethullah Gulen, *Essentials of the Islamic Faith* (Fairfax, Va.: The Fountain, 2000), p. 206; also available online: <http://fethullahgulen.org/a.page/books/essentials.of.the.islamic.faith/c155.html>.

<sup>12</sup> The translation of Qur'ānic verses in this study relies chiefly on Abdullah Yusuf Ali's work, with a few occasions where Shakir's, Asad's and Pickthall's translations are adopted.

<sup>13</sup> Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ma'ārij al-Qudus fī Madārij Ma'rifat al-Nafs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1975), p. 130; see also Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 96.

It is not (possible) that a man to whom the Book, the Wisdom and the prophetic office are given should say to people: “Be my worshippers rather than Allah’s;” on the contrary (He would say) “Be worshippers of Him Who is truly the Cherisher of all; for you have taught the Book and studied it earnestly.” Nor would he instruct you to take angels and prophets for lords and patrons. (3:79-80; see also 21:7-8).

The humanity of the prophets has another practical implication. The Qur’ān relates the argument put forward by the *kuffār* (those who are ungrateful to God/unbelievers) in which they disparaged the humanity of the messengers. They demanded that a messenger from God should be supernatural, akin in nature to the angels, or even that God should communicate with them directly (Q:17:90-93; 15:6-9; 25:21).

As guidance to humankind, revelations came to humans through the channel of their own species; otherwise, people would have taken the supernatural status of the messages as an excuse for not being able to implement the teachings of revelation. For the messengers to be approachable, they must be humanlike. Even if they were to be angels, as stipulated by the *kuffār*, they would have to be in human shape having human qualities, so that, by implementing the revelation practically, the messengers would demonstrate to people that humans are capable of living by its teachings (Q:6:8-9; 33:21; 60:4,6). In other words, the messengers of God are trained to be exemplars of decorum, dignity and integrity.

While the concepts of divine revelation and prophethood are common to the Abrahamic faiths, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam—setting them apart from other world religions—it is these same concepts that make Islam unique among other Abrahamic faiths. Similar to the Arabic term, the Hebrew term ‘*navi*’ or ‘*nabi*’ (prophet) is widely thought to have originally meant ‘one who is called’ or ‘speaker’, ‘spokesman of God’, or ‘proclaimer’.<sup>14</sup> As a concept, however, it acquires different characteristics in the Biblical context.

The designation ‘prophecy’ refers to one of the various forms of divination widely practiced in ancient Israel to gain information from the supernatural world in order to minimize the unpredictability and uncontrollability inherent in man’s experience of the world.<sup>15</sup> In Judeo-

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<sup>14</sup> David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), p. 83; David J. Zucker, *Israel’s Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, p. 82.

Christian tradition, prophets were primarily regarded as predictors of the future and as miracle workers. As predictors of the future, they were considered to be divinely inspired spokesmen of God or the God of Israel. Their predictions were thought to consist primarily of enigmatic descriptions of events that would unfold in the future, to herald the fulfillment of the ancient oracles and to foretell impending events.<sup>16</sup> Prophetic speech is based on the revelatory trance experience, when an external supernatural being or power is believed to have taken control of a person or when the soul is believed to have left the body and experienced visions and hallucinations of various kinds. The revelatory trance or 'ecstasy', as noted in the Jewish experience of revelation and prophecy, can come naturally or can be induced through the rhythmical beat of music, dancing, group excitement, self-flagellation or by the use of hallucinogens. Partly due to this variety of revelatory trance, the behavior of prophets was sometimes described as 'drunkenness' and 'madness'.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, the Qur'ānic conception of prophethood has nothing to do with prophesying in the sense of predicting the future. In Islam, a prophet is one who is charged to bring the news of and from the *ghayb* (unseen), the content of which may relate to the past, present or future.<sup>18</sup> Claiming independent knowledge of the future or of the *ghayb* in general is categorically condemned in the Qur'ān (6:50, 59; 7:188; 11:31; 27:65; 72:26-27) and is not part of the functions of prophets.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Proofs of the prophets***

Central to the concept of prophethood is the phenomenon of miracles. Known in Arabic as '*mu'jizah*' or in Qur'ānic terms as '*āyah*' (sign) or *bayyinah* (evidence), a miracle refers to that which proved the truthfulness of the person who said he was a prophet. It is a deed performed by a prophet, by God's permission (Q: 13:38; 40:78), in order to demonstrate the truth of his claim to prophethood. The proof constituted by the miracle is without any doubt an indication of a prophet's relationship with the source of revelation, the Creator of being.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-86, 153; Zucker, *Israel's Prophets*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, reprint. 2008, 2002), pp. 196-197.

<sup>19</sup> For a descriptive, comparative study of the concept of 'prophecy' in Judaism and Islam, see Fred Miller, "Prophecy in Judaism and Islam," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1978), pp. 27-44.

One who claims to be on a mission from God and to be in contact with the transcendental and supernatural must perform a deed that transcends the confines of nature, so that it would serve as his letter of credentials from the Creator and confirm his claim to be in contact with revelation. Just as the form of the entire scheme of being is a clear proof of the existence of God and His primordial unity, the miracle is a clear and manifest proof of the relationship of the prophet with the source of revelation.<sup>20</sup>

The Qur'ān describes and explicitly endorses the miracles of many of the prophets, such as those brought by Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Lūṭ, Sāliḥ, Mūsā and 'Īsā (peace be upon them). However, since all previous prophets were sent to their own nations, their miracles were related to the widespread arts or crafts of their time. The miracles would come in areas that were in each age the object of special attention, so that those specialized in each area might know that the thing in question was beyond the limits of human capacity. For example, since at the time of Moses sorcery enjoyed great prestige in Egypt, God Almighty caused his staff to change into a snake and swallow those of the sorcerers. At the time of Jesus it was the healing arts that enjoyed great prestige; thus most of his miracles involved healing. As for Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), since his prophethood is universal and he is the last prophet, his miracles are very diverse and connected with nearly all aspects of creation.<sup>21</sup>

The final miracle is an immortal miracle, sent as a Book in order to have the quality suitable to the Seal of Prophethood: the Last Messenger with the everlasting miracle. As history evolves and science and civilization progress, some of the wonders of the Qur'ān which were not clear before or were not possible to know have come to light. Although many of the early prophets (peace be upon them) had brought heavenly Books, the basis of their miracles was different from their Books. By contrast, the Qur'ān is proffered as the grand miracle of Muḥammad's prophethood. It stands as both divine revelation and the miraculous proof of that revelation. As Ibn Khaldūn explains, the Qur'ān "is its own proof....It is the clearest proof that can be because it unites in itself both the proof and what is to be proved."<sup>22</sup> On these dual functions of the Qur'ān, the Prophet (ﷺ) says: "Every Prophet was given miracles

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, pp. 188-192; Lari, *The Seal of the Prophets and His Message*, p. 36-37.

<sup>21</sup> Gullen, *Essentials of the Islamic Faith*, p. 226.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 192.

because of which people believed, but what I have been given, is divine Inspiration (the Qur'ān) which Allah has revealed to me. So I hope that my followers will outnumber the followers of the other prophets on the Day of Resurrection."<sup>23</sup> No other revealed book is described in the Qur'ān as a miracle in this way except the Qur'ān itself. It follows that not all embodiments of revelation are miracles, even though the event of revelation is itself a kind of miracle.<sup>24</sup>

It remains to be addressed why there should be revelation in the first place and what it is in revelation that is or is not accessible to human reason. The following section will explore the necessity of revelation and the roles it could partake in human socio-historical contexts.

### ***Revelation and Human Ultimate Concerns***

Humankind is faced with broad questions of "life understanding". These questions are lifelong concerns, some of which are sources of great expectation while others are sources of anxiety. They involve fundamental matters, expressed in the form of queries: How did the universe come into existence? Did it have a beginning and will it have an end? How was it that we humans came about here on earth? Does life have a purpose? If it does, what can give meaning to my life? Does my daily conduct matter in the long run? What happens to me after my death? What is good and what is bad and how can I know them? How should I treat others? How can I know?<sup>25</sup>

Humankind needs means that will provide, with certainty and clarity, satisfactory answers to such questions which concern their ultimate welfare. There is no doubt that science has broadened human horizons as far as knowledge of the natural world is concerned. However, it has not resolved most of the fundamental questions faced by man. It has been pointed out that the universe, about which science is making constant discoveries, is today the most mysterious issue in the entire history of intellectual thought, and although our present knowledge of nature is

<sup>23</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Arabic-English*, trans. Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1983), the Book of Virtue of the Qur'ān, Chapter: How the Divine Inspiration Used to be revealed, vol. 6, p. 474; Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, trans. 'Abdul Ḥamīd Siddīqī (Beirūt: Dār al-'Arabiyyah, 1972), The Book of Faith, Chapter: The Prophethood of our Apostle Muḥammad, vol. 1, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Ibrahim Husain, "The Prophethood in Islam," *al-Ittihad*, vol. 19, no. 1 (January-March 1982), p. 5.

much richer than in any previous epoch, even this is insufficient because, no matter where we turn, we are faced with ambiguities and contradictions.<sup>26</sup>

Attempts by material science to discover the secrets of life have been such pathetic failures that they leave us with more doubt than ever before. We are curious to know about our destiny. As we resort to science for the right, ultimate answer, we are left with more questions and doubts. If the reality of life is to remain unknown, how are we ever to function satisfactorily as individuals and as communities? This state of affairs is indeed a proof that man is badly in need of revelation from an external source.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the questions that have occupied human minds from time immemorial, as indicated above, are more important than others; and some are more easily discoverable by human reason than others. The entire range of human concerns that might call for external intervention may be classified into three ascending categories of importance: what human reason can generally discover/solve; what human reason can discover/solve but may err; and what falls beyond the human rational ambit.

To relate revelation to the first category, we must first acknowledge that humans are endowed with enormous potentialities to help them adapt to the environment and the world in which they live. Almost every newborn child arrives in the world with eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell and breathe, hands to touch, feet to walk and a mind to think. By the power of reason humans have acquired an important, a unique and strategic position in the cosmos. With the assistance of these faculties humans have come out with a *modus vivendi* to answer or solve some of those questions. To be kind to one's parents, not to kill an innocent soul, to give a hand to those in need are among the things about which unassisted reason can be very illuminative. Regarding the first category, the function of revelation is then *to confirm* rational dictates.<sup>28</sup>

It is a well established axiom in Islam that revelation and reason cannot contradict one another. Since both ultimately emanate from the

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<sup>26</sup> See Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *God Arises: Evidence of God in Nature and in Science* (New Delhi: Maktaba al-Risala, 1987), p. 145.

<sup>27</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *A'lām al-Nubuwwah*, (ed.) Khalid 'Abd al-Raḥman al-'Ak (Beirūt: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1994), pp. 65-66; Khan, *God Arises: Evidence of God in Nature and in Science*, pp. 144-146.

<sup>28</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *A'lām al-Nubuwwah* (Beirūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1987), p. 51.

same source, Allāh, the Almighty—revelation being the Word through which God is known, and reason being a God-given faculty or *fiṭrah*<sup>29</sup> (innate disposition) (Q:30:30) that can acquire knowledge of God—they complement one another. That is why Imām al-Ghazālī states that “*al-shar’ ‘aql min khārij wa-al-‘aql shar’ min dākhil*” (revelation is reason from without, and reason is revelation from within).<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the second category of human concerns—i.e., what human reason can discover/solve, but about which it may also err—it is to be noted that different people have come out with different answers at different ages. At certain points of time, people fell short of reaching the right solutions. However, their successors provided better solutions to the same problems/concerns, only to be succeeded by subsequent generations who attempted to deconstruct the previous solutions altogether. What makes a meaningful life, what constitutes happiness, and how to lead a happy life are matters to which different people have responded differently.

There is no doubt that human socio-history poses various challenges in the course of its evolution. A behaviour popular in one period may be condemned in another period, which, in its turn, may be superseded by subsequent novelties in other periods. In such an historical context, where truth may get overwhelmed by falsehood and where fact and fiction are mixed and equally celebrated, there must be guidance from without to show us the right path.

The guiding force cannot solely sprout from or develop within human faculties. True, the human thinking faculty has attained a high degree of intellectual power and maturity. But its conclusions are all relative, not absolute; and it is not capable of solving all the problems it has spawned. While man’s technological capacities are likely to increase in the future, we must also accept that the difficulties and problems with which he will be faced will also increase and grow more complex, just as his present problems are greater than those that confronted him in the past.<sup>31</sup>

Social cohesion cannot be assured simply by a high standard of technology or education, or by the existence of highly developed disciplinary mechanism. Modern technology has failed to curb our social problems. While some develop new systems to curb or detect a

<sup>29</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ma‘ārij al-Qudus*, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>31</sup> Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari, *The Seal of the Prophets and His Message: Lessons on Islamic Doctrine*, trans. Hamid Algar (Potomac MD: Islamic Foundation Center, 1989), pp. 10, 19.

particular crime, others work out ways of manipulating the system to escape detection; and to crown it all, others are advancing the very system for a more sophisticated crime. Like an unending succession of waves, the circle of social maladies continues unabated. Though it brings prosperity to man in some respects, modern technology is not the saviour of all our human problems, particularly the social ones.

Following a breach of privacy of a Malaysian MP by unidentified persons, it was widely acknowledged that with advances of technology, everyone is at risk of falling victim to invasion of privacy and that the existing laws are inadequate for dealing with such transgressions. The Malaysian Bar Council admitted that “[t]hose who abuse the technology can get away with their crime easily, and existing laws are too general or lenient.”<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in 1889 Britain, one of the highly developed countries in science and technology, was proud of its prison management system. A significant reduction in the prisoner population of England and Wales was attributed to “the application of the methods of civilization to the treatment of the criminal population.”<sup>33</sup> As the pace of civilization proceeds unabated and modern man continues to rely more and more on its civilizational mechanisms at the expense of divine teachings, the prisoner population grows in the same proportion. Today an influx of offenders has overcrowded Britain’s large, ‘magnificent’ prisons. According to recent statistics, 143 people per 100,000 in Britain are in prison. With its civilization, British jails today are declared “absolutely full” for the first time in history, rising above the critical 82,000 mark.<sup>34</sup> To tackle the problem, the government has resorted to several solutions (or is planning to do so). This includes early release of prisoners, jailing only the most dangerous villains, opening more jails, evicting prison officers from their (State-owned) homes and moving convicts into them, and sending foreign offenders home early. Still, the prison population is

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<sup>32</sup> “Need for Tougher Laws against Invasion of Privacy,” *The Star*, Sunday 22 February 2009, pp. 1, 14.

<sup>33</sup> “British Prison Reform; Great Improvement in Recent Years. The Prison System a Strong, Well-Managed Machine—Local and Convict Prisons,” *The New York Times*, page 2, August 12, 1889.

<sup>34</sup> “Thousands of Criminals to be Freed as Jails are Declared ‘Absolutely Full’ for First Time in History,” *Daily Mail*, February 22, 2008; Prison ships: an answer to overcrowded jails? *BBC Dorset*, retrieved March 29, 2008 from:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/dorset/content/articles/2007/01/29/portland\\_prison\\_ship\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dorset/content/articles/2007/01/29/portland_prison_ship_feature.shtml).

already outstripping all projected gains from such policies.<sup>35</sup> Jails are being built not only on land but also on sea. The British government has considered the prison ship, accepting that floating jails could help solve the problem of overflowing cells.<sup>36</sup> Flattered by his scientific progress, modern man may, in the near future, consider prisons in space.

The guiding force cannot be solely based on human-made laws. If everyone was left alone in the world with his own hopes, everyone would judge on the basis of his own temperament; he would do whatever he found pleasing and comfortable to his inclinations and interests, no matter how harmful it might be to others. The result would be a clash of desires and interests, leading to the severance of individual and social relations and unending corruption and anarchy.

The ultimate guidance must thus be transcendental in nature. One of the missions of the prophets, as attested to in the Qur'ān (2:213), is to bring people of different strata and ideologies to good terms and end their disputes. Addressing himself to the inadequacies of various schools of thought on human advancement and welfare, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) makes the following remarks in his book *The Social Contract*:

In order to discover the rules of society best suited to nations, a superior intelligence beholding all the passions of men without experiencing any of them would be needed. This intelligence would have to be wholly unrelated to our nature, while knowing it through and through; its happiness would have to be independent of us, and yet ready to occupy itself with ours.<sup>37</sup>

From this account, revelation came to *guide* humans and show them the right course of action through the example of prophets' behavior. It brings a complete code of conduct useful for personal, inter-personal and societal relations.

There is still a third category of questions which transcend human rationality. This includes metaphysical and eschatological questions. The

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> "Is this the first prison ship?" *The Sun*, retrieved March 29, 2008, from <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article68964.ece>; "Prison Ship Sought as Crowding Crisis Grows" *Times Online*, retrieved March 29, 2008, from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article608134.ece#cid=OTC-RSS&attr=Britain>; Bryan Finoki, "Floating Prisons, and Other Miniature Prefabricated Islands of Carceral Territoriality," retrieved March 29, 2008, from <http://subtopia.blogspot.com/2008/01/floating-prisons-and-other-miniature.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (New York : E. P. Dutton, 1950), p. 37.

unity of God, the existence of angels, the creation of the universe, and the coming of the hereafter are matters that transcend unassisted reason.<sup>38</sup> As Said Nursi (1873-1960) points out, the eternity of God cannot be known without revelation sent through the prophets:

It is the prophets and revealed books that make manifest the words and decrees of the Being Who, from behind the world of the unseen that is veiled by the cosmos, speaks, talks, and emits His commands and prohibitions. Just as the life existent in the cosmos bears decisive witness to the necessary existence of the Living and Eternal One, so too does it point to and indirectly confirm the pillars of belief in the sending of messengers and the revelation of scriptures, for these are the rays, the manifestations, and the relations of that eternal life.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding this category, the function of revelation is *to inform* and provide ultimate answers.<sup>40</sup>

At all three levels—*confirmation, guidance and information*—revelation is necessary. If humans are not led by revelation into a right way of using their reason, in arguing from effects to causes, etc., they would forever remain in the most doubtful situations and uncertainties. Without it, mankind will perpetually remain in the most woeful doubt, especially with respect to those things beyond the rational ambit. That is why the essence of revelation and prophethood has been described as a blessing for humankind “*We have not sent you except as a mercy for the whole world*” (21:107). As Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) remarks, “God’s mercy reaches its logical zenith in ‘sending Messengers,’ ‘revealing Books,’ and showing man ‘the Way’.”<sup>41</sup> Said Nursi explains that critical questions of the existence of the universe and human destiny cannot be known without revelation from God to humankind through His messengers:

Is it at all possible that the Lord of the cosmos should not solve, by means of a messenger, the complex talisman of the aim and purpose of all the changes that take place in the cosmos, and the riddle contained in the three difficult questions posed by all beings: “What is our origin? What is our destination? What is our purpose?” Is it at all possible that the Glorious Maker Who makes Himself known to sentient beings by means of His fair creation, and Who makes himself loved by means of His precious bounties, should not also communicate to sentient beings, by means of a messenger, what His pleasure

<sup>38</sup> Al-Māwardī, *A’lām al-Nubuwwah*, p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words, Tenth Word*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Cagaloglu, Turkey: Sozler Publications, 1992), p. 122.

<sup>40</sup> On these three categories, see al-Ghazālī, *Ma’ārij al-Qudus*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>41</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, p. 9.

desires of them in exchange? Is it at all possible that God should create mankind in a form predisposing it to suffer the consciousness of multiplicity but also containing the ability to engage in universal worship, without at the same time wishing to turn it away from multiplicity to unity, by means of a teacher and guide<sup>42</sup>?

Therefore, the purpose of the prophetic mission is to guide people to the right path as well as to bring them happiness, salvation, goodness and prosperity. The Qur'ān underscores two important responsibilities of the prophets. The first is to inform about the nature of God, His attributes, His acts of creation, and the shape of things to come at the end of the days. The purpose of this part is recognition of the unity of God and growing closer to Him. On the general mission of all prophets, the Qur'ān says:

*For We assuredly sent amongst every People a messenger, (with the Command), "Serve Allah, and eschew Evil". Of the People were some whom Allah guided, and some on whom error became inevitably (established). So travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who denied (the Truth) (16:36; see also 39:65-66).*

The prophets came to convey to human beings divine knowledge, free of all forms of illusion and error. They proclaimed a series of truths which a person would never have attained with his unaided reason. The supreme ideal of the prophets (ﷺ) is to nurture the human spirit in such a way that it reaches a higher truth and ascends toward ethical values, guiding him to a path that leads to eternity. Shining forth in the darkness, they have come forth to struggle against the sources of corrupt belief and misguidance, and to guide the most sacred and beautiful manifestation of the human spirit to its true and proper course. They rescue the human being from shameful forms of worship that are not worthy of his lofty station, and hold him back from all forms of erroneous thought and deviance that arise in his search for God. They liberate him from the confines of ignorance to the region of light and perception.<sup>43</sup> The Qur'ān states:

O People of the Book! There has come to you our Messenger, revealing to you much that you used to hide in the Book, and passing over much (that is now unnecessary): There has come to you from Allah a (new) light and a perspicuous Book. With it Allah guides all who seek His good pleasure to ways of peace and safety, and leads them out of darkness, by His will, unto the

<sup>42</sup> Nursi, *The Words, Tenth Word*, Introduction, p. 73.

<sup>43</sup> Lari, *The Seal of the Prophets and His Message*, pp. 11-12.

light, and guides them unto a straight path. (5:15-16; see also 14:1; 14:5; 2:257; 33:43; 57:9; 65:11).

### ***Unity of Revelation and Indivisibility of Prophethood***

Universality of the phenomenon of prophethood is unique to the Islamic conception of it. According to the Qur'ānic narration, the human race began from one man: Ādam (ﷺ) from whom the family of man grew and multiplied (4:1). Ādam, being the first man on earth, was also the first prophet of God (ﷻ). He received revelation from God, to be conveyed to his descendants. Among his progeny there were some who followed the divine teachings, and there were others who were swayed away from their father's teachings. This latter group of people worshipped different forces of nature. Some began to worship the stars, the moon and the sun, while others took to the worship of trees, animals, rivers, etc. Every kind of evil custom grew; many evils began to be considered right, and many right things were either ignored or condemned as wrong.<sup>44</sup>

The fact is that, after a long break of revelation, humankind tends to be forgetful and overwhelmed with superstitions, myths and all types of false notions.<sup>45</sup> Within such circumstances, God raised prophets among every nation. "To every people (was sent) a messenger" (Q: 10:47), "and there never was a people without a warner having lived among them (in the past)." (Q: 35:24).

It is obvious that the Qur'ān does not give an account of all God's messengers and, by implication, their messages. Some of them were mentioned in the Qur'ān while others were not "And certainly We sent messengers before you; there are some of them that We have mentioned to you and there are others whom We have not mentioned to you" (Q: 40:78). But it is clear that the most celebrated prophets are those whose own stories and those of their people have been told and retold in the Qur'ān.<sup>46</sup> It must be added that although prophecy is indivisible (Q: 2:136), the Qur'ān makes it clear that not all prophets are equal, for "We have made some messengers more excellent than others" (Q: 2:253).

<sup>44</sup> Ibn Abī al-'Izz al-Ḥanafī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqīdah al-Ṭahāwīyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1391 AH), p. 77; Abul A'lā Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding Islam* (London: Islamic Foundation, 1990), pp. 37-39.

<sup>45</sup> Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu, "Understanding the Qur'ān in the Light of Historical Change," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2003), p. 402.

<sup>46</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, p. 82.

The temporal nature of revelation embodies the concept of progressive disclosure as well as periodic reaffirmation.<sup>47</sup> Each messenger of God reminded his people of the lesson they had forgotten; and each brought legal codes tailored to the needs and the stage of culture of the people to whom he was sent. In other words, the particular teachings of each prophet were determined by the kind of predicaments he was trying to tackle. For example, Prophet Lūṭ combated the perverse acts of sodomy of his nation (11:77-83; 15:61-74), Prophet Shu‘ayb fought the economic and social corruption of the people of Madyan (7:85-86; 11:84-86) and Prophet Mūsā fought the socio-political corruption and infanticide of Fir‘awn and his minions (28:40).

Despite their relative differences, their messages were the same in their fundamentals. All messengers of God did away with all customs of ignorance and taught their people the right course of action. They preached adherence to a life of piety, goodness and peace. They also preached belief in life after death with its just mechanism of reward and punishment and, most important of all, belief in the unity of God, the only entity with a right to be worshipped. All others are “false gods” who can claim no share in divinity; anyone else is God’s servant (*‘abd*) and necessarily under His law and command.<sup>48</sup> Speaking on behalf of God’s messengers, Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) declares the universal divine unity: “The best thing I and the prophets before me have said is: ‘There is no god but Allah, alone, without any partner’.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, no true prophet ever called others to worship him or to worship other gods besides the One True God, known in Qur’ānic terminology as ‘Allah’ (S.W.T).

The unity of religion and indivisibility of prophethood are central to Islamic teachings. The Qur’ān maintains that the message brought by all messengers of God was Islam, the unconditional submission and surrender to the Will of God. (See, for example: 2:128-136; 3:52, 65-67; 5:111; 10:72, 84; 12:101, 27:31, 38, 44; 51:35-36). That is why, after mentioning the names of eighteen prophets in Sūrat al-An‘ām, Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) was asked to follow their guidance and way of submitting to God, (*Those were the (prophets) who received Allah’s*

<sup>47</sup> Zaki, “The Concept of Revelation in Islam,” p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Aḥmad bin ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyyah, *Kitāb al-Nubuwwāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, n.d.), p. 188; Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> Imām Mālik, *al-Muwatta’*, ed. Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Egypt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), *Kitāb al-Qur’ān*, Bāb Mā Jā’a fī al-Du‘ā’, vol. 1, p. 214; Bāb Jāmi‘ al-Ḥajj, vol. 1, p. 422.

*guidance, so follow their guidance*) (Q: 6:90). Not only that, but also all Muslims are required to believe in all messengers of God as well as their scriptures: “*The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers; they all believe in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers; We make no difference between any of His messengers*” (Q: 2:285, see also Q: 2:136; 3:84). However, since the true personalities of these prophets (peace be upon them) and the content of the scriptures they were sent with are often at variance with those presented in the Old and New Testaments, Muslims are obliged to uphold the Qur’ān’s account of these prophets.

On this divinely based frame of reference, prophethood was brought to an end through Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ). The revelation of the Qur’ān began to come to him on a lonely and meditative night in the Cave of Ḥirā’ on Jabal al-Nūr (the Mount of Light) in Makkah. The archangel Gabriel stood before him and commanded him to read (96:1-5). The revelation to Prophet Muḥammad continued for approximately 23 years.

Though he was one out of many messengers of God, Prophet Muḥammad is declared in the Qur’ān to be the last prophet: “*Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets*” (33:40). Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) himself testifies to this finality: “The chain of messengers and prophets has come to an end. There shall be no messenger nor prophet after me;”<sup>50</sup> “I am the last in line of the prophets of God.”<sup>51</sup>

With the closure of the office of prophethood, divine revelation to humankind, too, came to an end. That is because to be a messenger of the divine revelation (*rasūl*), one has to be a prophet first, as the divine revelation is not communicable to any ordinary man. Islam firmly upholds that divine revelation began with God’s revelation to Prophet Ādam for the guidance of human beings and continued through the ages, to be stopped finally and forever with God’s revelation to Prophet Muḥammad because God has completed His Will and perfected His true religion to humankind. History bears witness that no global religious movement has arisen since Islam—not that there have been no

<sup>50</sup> Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir et al. (Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), Kitāb al-Ru’yah, Bāb dhahabat al-Nubuwwah, vol. 4, p. 533.

<sup>51</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.) Kitāb Ḥajj, Bāb Faḍl al-Ṣalāh bi-Masjīday Makkah wa al-Madīnah), vol. 1, p. 1012.

claimants, but there have been no successful claimants.<sup>52</sup> The claim to prophethood and continuous revelation until the Last Day as proclaimed by, for example Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (1835-1908)<sup>53</sup> and Ayah Pin (b. 1940),<sup>54</sup> is heretical, untenable and off course.

By bringing prophethood and revelation to a close, Islam has not deprived the world of divine blessing which was available to previous generations. As stated above, the purpose of sending a prophet to a nation was to make known the divine will. That purpose has been

<sup>52</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, p. 81.

<sup>53</sup> Born in Qadian, India, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), the founder of the Ahmadiyya Community, believed that Prophet Muḥammad was the Last law-bearing prophet, but that non-law-bearing prophethood, subservient to Prophet Muḥammad's law remained open. He claimed to be a prophet, a follower of Prophet Muḥammad and the Promised Messiah who constantly received revelation from God. See Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Ḍarūrat-ul-Imam* [The Need for the Imam] (Islamabad: Islam International Publications Ltd, 2007, Urdu text first published in 1898), pp. 42, 51-52, Retrieved February 1, 2009 from

<http://www.alislam.org/library/books/TheNeedForTheImam.pdf>; *Khataman Nabiyyeen* (London, 1982), pp. 1-4, Retrieved February 1, 2009 from

<http://www.alislam.org/library/books/Khataman-Nabiyyeen-20080611MN.pdf>. For more on Ahmadiyya's doctrines, see *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); S. Abul Hasan Nadwi, *Qadianism: A Critical Study*, trans. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Islamabad: Da'wah Academy, International Islamic University, reprint 1990, 1965); Abul A'lā Mawdūdī, *The Qadiani Problem* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1979).

<sup>54</sup> Born in 1940 in Kampung Besar Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia, Ayah Pin, formerly known as Ariffin Mohammed, is the founder of the "Sky Kingdom", a quasi-religious commune located in the eastern Malaysian state of Terengganu. He claimed to be a prophet, the Mahdi, having been visited several times by the holy angel Gabriel, and to be the reincarnation of the holy figures in the world's major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Ayah Pin's ideology focuses largely on spiritual matters. In his sermons, he declared that the Sky Kingdom had given him the power and right to unite people of the "whole world" irrespective of their religions. Ayah Pin was declared an apostate for leaving Islam and spent 11 months in jail in 2001 for his activities. In 2005 his commune was demolished by the government of Malaysia. As of 2008, he remained in exile in Narathiwat, southern Thailand. See "Ayahpin," Retrieved February 1, 2009 from <http://www.theskykingdom.blogspot.com>; "Sky Kingdom," Retrieved February 1, 2009 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sky\\_Kingdom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sky_Kingdom); Steven Daniel, "Elusive Cult Leader Ayah Pin in south Thailand (Update), *The Star Online*, Thursday November 13, 2008, Retrieved February 1, 2009 from

<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/11/13/nation/20081113163048&sec=nation>.

For more on Ayah Pin's ideology, see Wan Mohd Azam Wan Mohd Amin, *Ajaran Sesat* [Deviant Teaching] (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2008), pp. 12-24.

brought to perfection through the World Prophet, whose message has met the requirements not only of seventh-century Arabia but also of all succeeding generations. Signalling the completion of heavenly religions, the Qur'ān unequivocally declares: “*This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion*” (5:3).

The perfection of religion and the completion of the prophethood and revelation thus go hand in hand. It is untenable to argue, however, that this leaves humanity without the blessing of God. That is because the continuous existence of the Qur'ān in its original form, besides the authentic Prophetic *ḥadīth*, assures continuous divine providence to humanity. Moreover, it is this availability of the Qur'ān in its original form that makes a new religion or code of life unnecessary; that is, as long as the Qur'ān continues to remain in its pure form, its social and ethical teachings can be reinterpreted and then extrapolated to the unfolding events in human social history.<sup>55</sup> The Prophet (ﷺ) is reported to have said “There are two things by which—if you adhere to both of them—you will never go astray: the Book of God and the Sunnah of His Prophet.”<sup>56</sup> While the divine message continues to be relevant, a new prophet is no longer needed, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

### ***The Relevance of the Prophetic Message to the Modern Age***

Several Muslim intellectuals have suggested that with and through Islam and its revealed book, humanity has reached rational maturity and, therefore, is no longer in need of further revelation. Prophets were appointed only to fulfil a special need. Abul A'ālā Mawdūdī (1903-1979) identifies four conditions under which the prophets have been sent to the world. Firstly, there was need for a prophet to be sent unto a certain nation to which no prophet had been sent before and no message brought by the prophet of another nation could have reached those people. Secondly, there was a need to appoint a prophet because the message of an earlier prophet had been forgotten by the people, or the teachings of the former prophets had been corrupted and hence it had become impossible to follow the message brought by that prophet. Thirdly, the

<sup>55</sup> Solihu, “Understanding the Qur'ān in the Light of Historical Change,” p. 401; n.a., “Perfection of Religion and Completion of Prophethood,” *Majallat al-Azhar*, vol. 46, no iii (1974), p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn 'Abd al-Barr al-Numayrī, *al-Tamhīd*, eds. Muṣṭafā ibn Aḥmad al-'Alwī and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Kabīr al-Bakrī (Morocco: Wizārat 'Umūm al-Awqāf wa al-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1387 AH), vol. 24, p. 331.

people had not received the complete mandate of Allah (S.W.T) through a former prophet; hence succeeding prophets were sent to fulfil the task of completing the religion of Allah (S.W.T). Fourthly, there was need for a second prophet to share the responsibility of office with the first prophet.<sup>57</sup>

None of the needs mentioned above remains to be fulfilled after the advent of Prophet Muḥammad. The Qur'ān acknowledges that every prophet was sent to a single nation (14: 4-6; 35: 24; 10: 47). Though prophethood was a universal phenomenon, in each particular case the scope of preaching of every prophet was limited to his own people. With the advent of Prophet Muḥammad, however, the day of national prophets was over. The Qur'ān says that Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) has been sent as a bearer of instructions for the whole mankind, "*We have not sent you but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them*" (34:28); "*And We have not sent you but as a mercy to the worlds*" (21:107; see also 25:1; 7:158). The cultural history of the world bears testimony to the fact that since the advent of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) up to the present time such conditions have always prevailed in the world which were conducive to transmitting his message to all nations at all times. It follows, therefore, that different nations no longer need different prophets after the time of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ).

Furthermore, the divine message of the Qur'ān brought by Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) is extant in its original and pure form. The message has suffered no process of distortion or falsification. Not a single word has been added to or expunged from the Qur'ān which the Prophet brought unto the world from Almighty Allah (S.W.T), nor can anyone make additions to or delete anything from it. The eternal preservation of the Qur'ān has been divinely assured "*We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)*" (15:9). In this way the second need that causes prophets to be sent unto the world has also been fulfilled.

Thirdly the Qur'ān clearly affirms that God has finally completed His divine Mission through the agency of Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) (5:3). Hence, there is no room for a new prophet to carry the divine mission to completion, which makes the third condition inapplicable.

As regards the fourth condition, if a partner were really needed he would have been appointed in the time of Prophet Muḥammad to share

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<sup>57</sup> Abul A'la Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding Islam*, pp. 58-60.

the burden of his ministry. Since no co-prophet was appointed, this condition is also inoperative.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, all possible needs for the transmission of divine revelations have now been fulfilled. Neither a law-bearing prophet nor a non-law-bearing prophet is needed after Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ). What is needed instead is reformation of religion and religious thought in the light of the Qur'ān and authentic Prophetic *ḥadīths*. The onus of this regeneration has been shifted onto the shoulders of reformers. In one *ḥadīth*, the Prophet says: “God will send to this *Ummah* at the beginning of every century a scholar (or scholars) who will regenerate their religion for them.”<sup>59</sup>

As there is no need for a new message or a new messenger from God, the message brought by Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) is still relevant and as sorely needed today as it ever was. As man's moral maturity lags behind his intellectual enlightenment, which in turn is outstripped by his technical and material achievements, he is constantly in need of divine guidance. Indeed, man has not become mature in the sense that he can dispense with divine guidance.

True, the Qur'ān was revealed in concrete historical settings where/when people were immersed in all types of immoralities. Polytheism, malpractice in trade, exploitation of the poor, and general irresponsibility toward family and society were the order of the day. The Qur'ān proffered practical solutions to those problems and laid down foundations upon which ultimate human concerns can be properly addressed. While it is true that the Qur'ān was directly dealing with the ongoing issues of the Arabian peninsula of the seventh century CE, it is also true that these acute problems were not peculiar to that context alone. They happened in the past and are still happening now in the present time (though in a more complex way); and there is no indication that they will cease to exist in the future. They are the human predicament. On this ground, the Qur'ān is a response to the ultimate concerns of humankind.

### ***Conclusion***

Revelation in Islam is a blessing and mercy to humankind. Its content is not irrational. Had it been unintelligible or incomprehensible, it would

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān bin al-Ash'ath, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Beirūt: al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), vol. 4, p. 108.

not have been sent to rational beings, which humans are. Revelation is not intended to mislead, misguide or mystify. It is a *hudan* (guidance) and *bayān* (explanation), intended to chart a course leading to the spiritual and material wellbeing of individuals and societies in this worldly life and to the eternal *falāḥ* (felicity) in the Hereafter. If properly studied, scrupulously extrapolated, and meticulously applied to socio-historical problems faced by humans, revelation is capable of solving human predicaments and uplifting their morale. Human advancement in science and technology has not come forth with conclusive answers to humanity's ultimate concerns. On the contrary, it raises more questions, the answers to which lie beyond its domain.

The Qur'ān declares the universality of the phenomenon of prophethood, giving a concise account of the messengers and the messages sent to early nations, narrating what later generations need to know about their affairs. The Islamic concept of revelation is likewise all-encompassing; it incorporates all messages sent to the early prophets. To bring the succession of the messages and messengers to an end, the Qur'ān is declared to be the last message sent through the last messenger to the last human community in the last phase of world history.